

THE MEANING OF BEING “SPIRIT FILLED” & “BAPTIZED IN THE SPIRIT”

Matthew 3:11 and Ephesians 5:18

On Friday May 15, 1987, Misty and I exchanged wedding vows and became man and wife. In the “presence of God and these assembled witnesses,” we committed to stay together “for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.” It was the happiest day of my life, and I would do it all over again. But after 21 years of marriage there is one thing I have learned: *On May 15, 1987, I had no idea what I was getting myself into...and neither did Misty!* Since that day, my life has been an attempt to live out up to that commitment.

Am I more married today than I was 21 years ago? No.

Am I more committed, and is my relationship with Misty deeper, and fuller than it was 21 years ago? Yes! And it continues to grow as we continue to give ourselves to one another.

I believe there is a direct parallel between marriage and a person’s relationship with God. When most people make a commitment to Christ, just like marriage, they don’t completely understand what they are getting into. During a moment in time a person makes a commitment, then that person spends the rest of his life living up to that commitment, and living out that commitment—just like marriage. Over time, a person’s relationship with God should grow deeper, fuller, and more intimate—just like marriage.

What is Salvation?

What the Christian faith refers to as “salvation” (being in a right relationship with God) is a three-fold process,¹ all of which takes place the moment a person places their faith in Jesus Christ, and all of which continues by faith in Jesus Christ.

Three words describe this process; justification, sanctification, and glorification. Justification occurs the moment we place our faith in Jesus Christ. At that very moment our sins are forgiven and we are made right with God. Sanctification refers to the life-long process of growing and maturing in our faith, becoming like Christ. Glorification will take place when we stand before God. At that moment we will be free, not only from the power of sin, but the very presence of sin. Thus, when a person places his faith in Jesus Christ—at that moment—he is saved (justification), he is being saved (sanctification), and he will be saved (glorification).

The Holy Spirit is active throughout the whole salvation process. It is the Holy Spirit who draws (or compels) a person to faith in Jesus Christ (justification). It is the Holy Spirit who works in a Christian’s life, transforming him into the image of Christ (sanctification). It will be the Holy Spirit who will stand beside us (as our Advocate), when we stand before the Father for glorification.

While the Holy Spirit is active through all three phases, He is most active during the phase of sanctification. It is during this life-long process that the phrases “Spirit-filled”, “filled with the Spirit”, and “baptized in (by, or with) the Spirit”² occur.

¹ “Process” may not be the best word to use to describe the totality of salvation, but it is the best word I can think of at this time. By using the word “process” I do not mean to imply there are three separate “acts” to salvation. All three phases, potentially, occur at conversion, but experientially they take place at different times.

² The reason there are differences of opinion among Christians concerning the baptism and filling of the Holy Spirit starts with the term itself. The term, *en pneumatī*, can be translated, “of the Spirit,” “by the Spirit,” “with the Spirit,” or “in the Spirit.” Each translation carries a different connotation. Thus, the question is, “Is the Holy Spirit the primary agent? Or, “Is He the means by which believers are baptized?”

Important Questions

What does it mean to be “filled with the Spirit?” Is being “filled with the Spirit” the same as being “baptized in the Spirit?” When do these “fillings” and “baptisms” take place? These are some of the questions I hope to address this morning.

Before examining these questions, however, two things need to be said: First, there are legitimate differences of opinions among evangelical Christians concerning the meaning and timing of the “baptism” in the Holy Spirit and the “fillings” with the Holy Spirit. I believe most differences are differences in terminology and understanding, not differences in outcome and results. Second, I do not confess to have the definitive answer to the questions I am asking. I am still growing in my understanding, and I am trusting Jesus’ promise when He said, “But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). My prayer is that we can learn together.

Background to the Question

Before Jesus began His earthly ministry He went to John the Baptist to be baptized. John the Baptist, who had been baptizing people with “water for repentance” (Matthew 3:11), prophesied that when the Messiah came, the Messiah would baptize “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3:13). Jesus said He was baptized to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). At the conclusion of Jesus’ baptism the “heaven was opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on Him”

(Matthew 3:16), the “dove” symbolized the Holy Spirit. Jesus, who was born without sin, received the Holy Spirit in order to have power for service.

During a point in His ministry when people were questioning if He really was the Messiah, Jesus said, “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (John 7:38). Then, interpreting for us, John wrote, “By this He meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified” (John 7:39). In other words, since the Holy Spirit was working through Jesus, Jesus’ followers could not receive the Holy Spirit until after Jesus had been resurrected from the dead.

In John 15 and 16, Jesus promised His disciples that after He left, He would send a Counselor (the Holy Spirit) who would come in them, and remain in them, forever. Then, on the morning of His resurrection, when He first appeared to His disciples, the Bible records, “Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you.’ And with that He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:21-22). At that point, and ever since that time, the Holy Spirit has indwelt believers the moment they “confess with [their] mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in [their] heart that God raised Him from the dead” (Romans 10:9). Fifty days after Jesus “breathed” on the disciples, on the Day of Pentecost, Jesus’ followers were “filled with the Spirit” (Acts 2:4).

Question: *Why did the disciples, who already had the Spirit in them (John 20:21-22), need to be “filled with the Spirit?” (Acts 2:4)*

Answer: *The Holy Spirit indwelt them for **provision** (now they were justified and placed in a right relationship with God through their faith in the resurrected Christ*

John 20:21-22); then, *the Holy Spirit filled them for **power*** (now they were being sanctified and empowered to change the world for Christ—Acts 2:4). When believers stand before God, the *Holy Spirit will overflow us for **promotion*** (then we will be glorified and dwell with Christ forever).

Much more could be said, but that's enough for now. I need to repeat, I do not claim to have all the answers, nor do I claim to have all the explanations. Here is what I do know...

1. The Holy Spirit indwells (lives inside) every believer.

This truth is the promise of Jesus in John 15 and 16. At the moment of your conversion the Holy Spirit took up residence in your life. At conversion every believer is “baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13). Speaking to believers, the Apostle Paul emphatically stated, “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ” (Romans 8:9³). A person without the Spirit is a person without Christ. A person without Christ is a person without hope. If you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ, and are trusting Him as Lord of your life, rest assured, the Holy Spirit (the Person Jesus Himself promised) lives inside you.

2. There is a difference between the Holy Spirit indwelling you and the Holy Spirit controlling you.

³ Other Bible verses that refer to the Spirit indwelling believers include Romans 5:5; 1 Corinthians 2:12; 2 Corinthians 5:5, plus more).

Every believer is indwelt by the Spirit, but not every believer is controlled by the Spirit. How can this be? Returning to the analogy of marriage; a lot of married couples dwell together, but are not fully committed to one another—he does his thing, she does her thing and the two never do anything together.

At conversion, we are baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ (the Church).⁴ At conversion, the Spirit indwells us, but that does not mean He controls (or empowers) us. If it did, there would be no need for God to command Christians, “Be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). Literally this phrase reads, “be being filled with the Spirit.” The Spirit’s filling is a one-time event, as well as a continual, repeated event.⁵

To talk about the indwelling of the Spirit is to talk about where the Spirit resides (in the life of all believers). To talk about being filled with the Spirit is to talk about believers being controlled by the Spirit, and not every believer allows the Spirit to control him or her.

3. Many Christians never allow the Holy Spirit to control them.

How sad! Many Christians are satisfied with the status quo, and as long as their place is reserved in heaven they could care less about what happens on earth. The

⁴ Through water baptism believers are identified with the body of Christ through a local church. In 2 Corinthians 12:13, the idea behind “body of Christ” is the Universal Church—the body of all believers, past, present, and future.

⁵ Some believe the initial “filling” of the Holy Spirit is what the Bible calls, “baptism in the Spirit,” and is a separate work, apart from salvation. Others believe this initial “filling” (or “baptism by the Spirit”), is the salvation experience. Whatever the terminology, or interpretation, both views believe in the need to be filled with the Spirit initially and continually.

reason many Christians look mad and bitter is because they have not allowed the Holy Spirit to have complete control of their lives.

What does it mean to be Spirit-filled?

I hope you are getting a better picture of what the Holy Spirit desires to do in your life. As I understand it, being “Spirit-filled” means four things.

1. It means you have opened yourself to be “filled” with God.

In the same way you can fill a bucket with ocean water without depleting the supply of ocean, so you can be filled with God without making God less than He is. Whether you refer to this as “Spirit baptism”, “second blessing,” or “total surrender,” every believer needs to come to a place in their Christian journey where they open themselves completely to the Lordship of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit of God. To be Spirit-filled means you have prayed, “God, here I am. Take all of me there is to have. Fill me with your power and presence.”

2. It means you have committed every area of your life to Christ.

You can’t be “filled” with the Spirit, and at the same time want to hold on to part of your life. You can’t say, “God, I will give you every area of my life except work, or except finances, or relationships, or bad habits, or whatever.” To be Spirit-filled means

every area of your life is under Christ's control. To be Spirit-filled means following Christ is a lifestyle, not just another hobby in your already over-committed life.

3. It means you glorify Christ in all things.

The primary reason Jesus promised the Holy Spirit was so He (the Holy Spirit) would bring glory to Jesus, through the lives of believers (John 16:14). A self-controlled Christian is in it for what he can get out of it. A Spirit-controlled Christian prays, "God, however you can use me to bring glory to Christ, do it."

4. It means you are committed and empowered to do God's will.

A Spirit-filled Christian looks for ways to serve God at home, at work, at church, or at school. A Spirit-filled Christian prays, "Lord, just show me what to do and I will do it." A Spirit-filled Christian serves God while he is waiting for God to show him what to do.

What are the Evidences of a Spirit-Filled Christian?

How can you know you are Spirit-filled? How can you know if others are Spirit-filled? These are legitimate questions. The Bible mentions at least four evidences.

1. The fruit of the Spirit will be manifested in your life.

You know an apple tree is an apple tree because it produces apples. You know an orange tree is an orange tree because it produces oranges. In the same way, you can know you are filled with the Spirit by the fruit you produce. Galatians 5:16-23 reads, "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature...The acts of the sinful nature are obvious...But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." No one is perfect, but if you are filled with the Spirit, you will produce more Spirit fruit than you do sinful fruit. You will see the fruit of the Spirit increase in your life, and it will be obvious to those around you.

2. Your Spiritual gift(s) will become evident in your life.

Through the Holy Spirit, God has gifted every believer with gifts to be used to serve Him, and build others up. The Spirit-filled believer will not only discover his Spiritual gift, but he will find more and more opportunities to use his gifts. In fact, it is through using gifts people usually discover their gifts. You don't wait to discover your gift and then decide where best to use it. You step out on faith and begin serving God, then you look back and say, "O, that's my Spiritual gift. Where else can I use it." As you use your gifts, God will manifest Himself to others through you. You will sense a power and freedom in ministry like never before; and Jesus Christ will be glorified in your life.

3. Worship will become a top priority in your life.

The Spirit-filled believer will long for more time with God and there will be a void in his life when he misses worshiping with others. The Spirit-filled believer will make time, and take time, to spend alone with God. The Spirit-filled believer will not let anything come between, and keep him away from, worshiping with other believers. A Spirit-filled believer will enjoy worship, and will learn to express himself in worship—both in private worship and public worship.

4. You will find opportunities, and boldness, to witness.

Jesus, Himself, said when the Holy Spirit came you would receive power, and would witness (Acts 1:8). A Spirit-filled believer prays for, and takes advantage of, every opportunity to witness.

CONCLUSION:

What is the meaning of “Spirit-baptism?” It means you have been completely immersed in the power, presence, and Person of the Holy Spirit. What does it mean to be “filled with the Spirit?” It means you have surrendered your whole self, and opened your whole life, to be filled with God.

When you made your commitment to Christ—be it 1 year ago, or 30 years ago—you may not have understood all it meant to follow Him. You still may not know, but you

do know you need a deeper commitment, a fuller relationship, and a closer intimacy with Christ. That deeper commitment is yours when, through faith, you open yourself up to the Spirit—who already lives within you—and allow Him complete control of your life.

If you would like this closer intimacy, pray this prayer with me, and then spend time worshiping God, allowing the Holy Spirit to speak to you, and to work through you.

“Dear Lord Jesus, I thank You and praise You for Your great love to me. My heart is filled with joy whenever I think of the great gift of salvation You have so freely given to me. Now I come in obedience to Your call. I want to open myself to all the Holy Spirit wants to do in my life. I do not come because I am worthy myself, but because You have invited me to come. I thank You that You have made the vessel of my life a worthy one to be filled with the Holy Spirit of God. I want to be overflowed with Your life, Your love and Your power, Lord Jesus. I want to show forth Your grace, Your Words, Your goodness, and Your gifts to everyone I can. And so with simple, childlike faith, I ask You, Lord, fill me with the Holy Spirit. I open all of myself to You, to receive all of Yourself in me. I love You, Lord, and I lift my voice in praise to You. I welcome Your might and Your miracles to be manifested in me for Your glory and unto Your praise.”